ENHANCING RURAL LEARNING

Report of the Task Force on Rural Education

Harry Clarke
Jim Imrich, Chair
Ev Surgenor
Nancy Wells

Submitted to:
Honourable Christy Clark
Minister of Education

2003

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Table of Contents

I. Summary 2

II. Rural Education Task Force Report 10

III. Rural Education Task Force Recommendations 30

IV. References 39

V. Appendices

Appendix A: List of Submissions 41

Appendix B: Reading Performance by Province 42

Approximately 86,000 or 15 per cent of British Columbia's public school students attend rural schools.

Summary

Approximately 86,000 or 15 per cent of British Columbia's public school students attend rural schools. Many of these schools are so remote and isolated that there is no road access. Some of these schools have less than 10 students spread across many grades. Over the past decade, rural enrolment has declined as resource-based communities adjust to downturns in global markets. The challenge of providing quality education to rural students in this environment has prompted the Minister of Education, Honourable Christy Clark, to appoint a task force to study rural education and to make recommendations for a provincial rural education strategy.

The Value of Rural Education

As the task force toured the province, school community after school community spoke in defence of the virtues, benefits and values of rural education. In these schools, each student can make a personal impact on the whole, and talents and contributions are highlighted and recognized in the school community. There is a family atmosphere that makes small rural schools safe and nurturing environments for students. This combined with small classes and low teacher-pupil ratios creates a positive learning environment. A flexible approach to meeting student needs often fosters innovative and creative solutions. Rural challenges force schools to examine new ideas and often rural teaching strategies and organizational solutions are less conservative than their urban counterparts.

The task force heard the rural school described more than once as the 'heart of the community'. In many small towns, the school hosts weddings, dances, town meetings, movie nights, guest speakers and special community events, creating a strong bond between the community and their school.

Rural Education Challenges

Economic and Population Effects

Despite the virtues of rural education, substantial challenges remain. Many of B.C.'s rural communities have economies that rely heavily on one sector or one employer. The effects of a drop in commodity prices, trade barrier, mine closure or series of poor salmon runs can be economically devastating for a small rural community. Displaced workers

often cannot find new work in their community and are forced to leave. This economic uncertainty adds stress on many families and brings underlying social issues to the forefront.

Many B.C. rural communities are experiencing dramatic declines in population and student enrolment. Enrolment decline is most severe among the 270 schools located within the smallest communities. During the past year, these schools have experienced an average six-per cent decline in average enrolment.

Lower district enrolment creates a drop in the funds generated by per-student funding and a resulting decline in the total school board budget. Since the enrolment declines are spread throughout a district among different communities, boards must decide how to reallocate fewer resources to best accommodate for the needs of the district as a whole, as well as for each community. Complicating these decisions is the reality that whether a school is operating at capacity or not, there are certain fixed operating costs. As student numbers drop, the financial viability of the school comes into question. At the secondary level, the range of secondary courses further complicates these challenges. Often a board must make decisions that will affect the number of course options offered in their secondary schools.

Unlike urban centres where driving distances are usually relatively short, in rural communities the combination of the drive to the bus stop and the school bus or water taxi ride can add as much as three hours to a child's day.

The Distances

The isolation of many of B.C.'s rural schools adds to the challenges. Parents are concerned about the effects of long bussing times on their children. Unlike urban centres where driving distances are usually relatively short, in rural communities the combination of the drive to the bus stop and the school bus or water taxi ride can add as much as three hours to a child's day. Although parents thought that long commutes were bearable for older students, they felt that elementary-aged students should be schooled as close to home as possible.

Rural students also face unique road hazards compared to their city dwelling peers. In the interest of student safety, some rural school boards fund bussing for students within the former ministry-prescribed walk limits. This adds to the costs of school transportation. The ministry has changed its transportation policies to give school boards more autonomy in determining local bussing arrangements and school district transportation policy. The Ministry of Education funds transportation and the budget is protected at the 2001/02 level.

The task force found that most rural communities have strong relationships with their schools and school boards.

School district staff serving rural communities speak of 'windshield time'—the long unproductive hours that are spent driving from the board office to rural communities. Rural school districts estimate that as much as 25 per cent of many school district staff's time is spent in transit.

The Heart of the Community

The task force found that most rural communities have strong relationships with their schools and school boards. However, strained community-school board relationships are evident in some districts where remote communities feel that their boards are not responsive to local needs. These communities suggest alternate governance models ranging from charter schools to municipally-run schools to a provincial rural schools school board. School boards have expressed that consensus-building with the numerous town councils and mayors within their district can be challenging.

The task force received a number of submissions from communities and parents frustrated by the collective agreements between school boards and support staff that make sharing services extremely difficult or impossible without legislative intervention. The submissions contend that these types of restrictions make it difficult for communities to implement the creative solutions needed to adapt to declining enrolment and to retain a school in their community.

The Unique Classroom

Educational challenges in a rural setting include: multi-grade classes, inflexible curriculum, teacher training, professional development, teacher recruitment and retention, support of special needs students and course selection at the secondary level.

It is not uncommon to find the rural teacher with three or more grades of students in the same classroom. Addressing multiple learning outcomes spanning different grades is a challenge for which the curriculum—Integrated Resource Packages—is not designed. Teachers and districts expressed concern that new teachers are not adequately prepared for the demands of teaching in a rural setting. Attracting and retaining teachers, particularly specialists in some subjects, is difficult for some rural school districts. Finally, rural educators are deeply concerned about access to relevant professional development opportunities that fit within the district professional development budget. The task force

found a need for cost-effective professional development opportunities that address rural education needs.

Supporting students with special needs is a particular challenge in districts where schools are greatly dispersed. Some support services should be delivered on a regular basis but travel times can make this impossible.

Since many rural schools have high proportions of aboriginal students, the unique challenges of aboriginal education must also be addressed. Provincially, the aboriginal school completion rate is just over 40 per cent, a higher proportion of aboriginal students are below expectations on Foundation Skills Assessment scores and aboriginal students are over-represented in special education categories with the exception of the gifted category. Aboriginal communities continue to voice concern about the academic achievement of their children and racism within the school system.

Great advances have been made in the quality of courses offered through electronic means.

The Promise of Technology

Technology holds great promise for rural education, but many challenges have yet to be overcome. The task force found that although rural schools have access to the Internet through PLNet, many small communities have such narrow bandwidth that they are unable to use their connection for much more than email. Narrow bandwidth restricts their ability to download large Internet files, open certain web sites, use interactive web-based software, participate in live web-based learning opportunities and fully benefit from electronically delivered courses.

Great advances have been made in the quality of courses offered through electronic means. Distributed electronic learning holds great promise in small communities struggling to offer a variety of senior secondary courses to small classes without the benefit of a teacher specialist. Sharing instructors through video conferencing is also seen as a potential technological solution for small schools.

The task force found that despite the potential of electronic learning, viewing it as a comprehensive solution is met with widespread reservation. Many students lack the intrinsic motivation, reading skills or individual learning style that these courses demand and appropriate on-site teacher support is still required.

Despite the many benefits of rural education shared with the task force, there remains a gap in performance between rural and urban students.

The Dollars

The task force encountered a widespread concern about funding and the effects of the new funding allocation system, which recognizes that in some rural regions, operating costs are higher due to climate or isolation. The provincial funding model considers costs through unique geographic factors supplements, including the dispersion index, physical and environmental components and small community supplement. Communities and districts expressed concern that these factors do not fully reflect the real costs of operating schools in remote and rural communities. Throughout rural B.C. there is a perception that the new funding allocation system under-funds rural boards compared to urban boards.

Although often confused about how funding totals are reached, School and District Parent Advisory Committees and members of the communities asserted that the funding generated by their school and their community tax base justified not closing their rural school.

Framing a Rural Education Strategy

Education is about overcoming challenges and enabling learners. The task ahead is to create a rural education strategy that provides educational equity (i.e. an 'equally good' education) to students in rural communities. The differences between rural and urban communities necessitate a strategy of diversity, where districts serving rural schools and rural communities find solutions that capitalize on local strengths and differences. It is not sufficient to impose urban solutions on rural schools and expect 'equally good' education.

Despite the many benefits of rural education shared with the task force, there remains a gap in performance between rural and urban students. Statistics Canada's recent report, *Understanding the Rural-Urban Reading Gap*, found that Canada's urban 15-year-old students performed significantly better in reading than their rural counterparts. The gap in reading levels between urban and rural students was significant in B.C. but was the third smallest behind Nova Scotia and Manitoba. B.C.'s rural students were also assessed to have the second highest rural reading scores in Canada behind Alberta, and a higher reading level than the average in six other provinces. Although the B.C. education system can build on this strength, the rural education strategy should aim to reduce the gap between rural and urban students.

The 2002 Foundation Skills Assessment of Reading and Numeracy indicate a similar rural gap. Student-level scores in reading and numeracy for Grades 4, 7 and 10 were significantly lower in rural settings, ranging from a low of 0.4 per cent for Grade 10 reading to between 2.7 per cent and 4.6 per cent in the other grade levels tested. Using a statistical technique called hierarchical linear modelling to find characteristics that account for the differences between rural and urban students, three significant factors were found: aboriginal status, community education levels and school satisfaction. That said, the available data is limited in the extent it can describe student or community characteristics. As a result, the total explained variance in the model is quite low (seven to 17 per cent). Furthermore, the data does not reflect differences in the type or effectiveness of instructional practices within schools.

The question of equity is challenging. Rural and urban communities are different and to attempt to apply urban solutions to rural schools is to ignore the uniqueness that distinguishes rural B.C. There are benefits to a rural lifestyle that urban students do not experience. Districts serving rural schools and rural communities must find solutions that are 'equally good' but likely different than urban solutions. Students in rural communities should graduate with the skills, knowledge and abilities similar to their urban peers.

The central questions are: Can the rural-urban achievement gap be reduced or eliminated, and can a small rural school offer the quality of educational experience that would be required to achieve this? The answers seem to be yes. A British study examined the education quality of large and small schools (i.e. less than 100 students and mostly found in rural settings). Based on extensive testing programs as well as school inspections, the study concluded that, "Overall, the quality of learning tends to be slightly better in the small rather than the large schools... On a wide range of comparisons concerned with the quality of education provision, small schools are rated rather more favourably than larger ones" (HMSO, 1995). Other studies show similar results.

The key to small rural schools overcoming size and resource limitations seems to lie in instructional quality. Professional development that helps build expertise in instructional practices through interactive, systematic and collaborative means is proving to be effective in reducing achievement gaps (Grossman, 1990; NFIE, 1996). Studies are now highlighting the benefits of matching more powerful teaching with the most needy students as a key strategy to reducing the achievement gap (Darling-Hammond, 1997; Haycock, 1998).

Can the rural-urban achievement gap be reduced or eliminated, and can a small rural school offer the quality of educational experience that would be required to achieve this?

Recommendations for a Rural Education Strategy

In appreciation of the Minister's interest in rural concerns and desire to assure a quality education for students in rural communities, the task force recommends that the following make up the beginning of a provincial rural education strategy:

1. Recognize the contributions of rural schools.
2. Make the improvement of rural-urban equity of educational outcomes a Ministry of Education priority.
3. Create the provincial vision for rural education by focusing on how to foster equitable student achievement in all areas of the province.
4. Invest in the continuous instructional improvement and success of rural educators through professional development and teacher training.
5. Work with education partners to build a network of rural educators and leaders.
6. Produce a planning document that enables teachers to adapt the curriculum —Integrated Resource Packages— to reflect the needs of multi-grade classrooms and the strengths of rural environments.
7. Encourage partnerships and co-ordination across social service agencies to support students in communities undergoing economic hardship.
8. Enable creative solutions to reduce school operating costs.
9. Facilitate the provision of increased educational opportunities for students and educators by considering more flexible, balanced approaches to designing school calendars and timetables.
10. Use shared services among school districts, regions and small communities to find cost savings. Use the savings to support rural education.
11. Build local capacity in accessing grants, federal funding and corporate partnerships that could provide additional funding to rural schools.
12. Increase public understanding of the funding allocation system and the unique geographic factors.
13. Review rural schools funding.

14. Increase learning options for rural students and educators through technological solutions.

15. Deliver services to rural special needs students by developing partnerships and creative solutions.

16. Seek models for education delivery to young children in remote rural communities as an alternative to school closure.

17. Encourage greater co-operation between school districts and First Nations groups and parents.

18. Increase connections with all parents, including those of students who currently receive public education through an alternate delivery system such as home schooling.

19. Build on the strength of volunteerism in rural communities.

Rural Education Task Force

Terms of Reference

Over the past decade, rural enrolments have declined as resource-based communities adjust to downturns in global markets. The challenge of providing a quality education to rural students in this environment has prompted the Minister of Education, Honourable Christy Clark, to appoint a task force to study rural education.

Jim Imrich was appointed chair of the Task Force on Rural Education Strategy. Members of the task force were: Ev Surgenor (superintendent of schools, School District #20); Nancy Wells (superintendent of schools, School District #75); and Harry Clarke (mayor of Fort Nelson). The task force was charged with:

- Reviewing the challenges and opportunities in providing a quality rural education program.
- Reviewing current best practices.
- Examining the role that e-learning can play in rural education.
- Visiting rural schools and communities to consult on innovative solutions.
- Making recommendations for an effective rural education strategy.
- Reporting to the Minister the task force findings.

The chair contacted all school boards serving rural schools and offered to visit to hear presentations and receive submissions. School districts that responded to the task force's offer were asked to host the visit and notify those interested within the district that presentations were welcome. The task force established some guiding questions and topics to direct the feedback. The questions asked were:

- What are you feeling good about in your school or school district?
- What rural challenges do your school and district face?
- How you would like to see your school or district operating in the future?

Specific feedback was also requested on teaching and learning practices, successful community/parent involvement strategies, use of electronic and distance learning, partnerships and co-operative work examples, use of shared services or facilities for cost effectiveness, professional development of rural teachers, professional preparation of rural teachers, learning resources acquisition and application, and transportation.

Submissions were accepted at the visits, by mail or email through the Ministry of Education's web site.

Approximately 436 people attended the visits hosted by 30 school districts. The task force received 234 submissions in total. Appendix A contains a district-by-district breakdown of the submissions.

"In Tahsis there is very little crime. The air is very clean to breath[e] and there is very little pollution. This is a great place to live. I don't want to live in a big city."

Charlie John
Grade 6, Captain Meares School, Esperanza

Definition: What is Rural?

As the task force toured the province, it became apparent that 'rural' means different things to different people in different communities. Demographics statistically differentiate rural from urban, but a unique mindset defines rural.

The Rural Mindset

Some feel that rural is not having a Starbucks, public library or easy access to many of the amenities and opportunities that urban dwellers take for granted. People in these communities can feel a sense of being isolated from the conveniences of urban B.C.

Many who spoke to the task force view rural as a lifestyle they cherish—the joy of living far from the density, social problems and hectic pace of a city. These individuals enjoy the social bonds that develop within a small community where you know everyone by their first name.

Some who live in larger populations outside of the southern coastal regions also share this rural mindset. The task force recognizes that defining rural strictly using population levels will not accommodate these people. Regardless of what population level is considered urban, there are many who would still see themselves and their community as rural.

The Demographics of Rural

Statistics Canada defines rural and small town areas as being:

- All municipalities with urban populations of 1,000 to 9,999;
- Rural areas where less than 50 per cent of the employed individuals commute to the urban core of a municipality with more than 10,000 inhabitants.

Municipal centres with more than 10,000 inhabitants or rural areas where more than 50 per cent of the population commutes into a centre with more than 10,000 are considered urban. These definitions are used for

Since the first school was opened in 1849 to educate the children of the Hudson's Bay Company officers, rural education has been at the core of the province's society.

government statistical reports and Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) studies.

The task force has chosen to adapt these definitions for its report. Rural schools are defined as schools within communities that match the demographic definition. Since few districts govern only rural schools, the task force will refer to districts serving rural schools. These are districts that have at least one school in a community that matches the Statistics Canada definition of rural.

Rural Education in British Columbia

B.C.'s Rural Beginnings

Since the first school was opened in 1849 to educate the children of the Hudson's Bay Company officers, rural education has been at the core of the province's society. In the early days, all schools were rural and small. Only as cities developed did the need to distinguish between rural and urban education develop. Schools outside of an urban area were separate administrative units responsible for governing and operating a small schoolhouse. These became local school districts.

From 1884 to the early 1930s, over 800 small school districts arose throughout the province each administering one school. In 1946, these schools were amalgamated into 74 regionally defined school districts. School districts became responsible for administering multiple schools within their jurisdiction. These school districts were further amalgamated in 1996 to the current 60.

The B.C. education system has now grown to approximately 1,800 public schools serving about 576,200 learners. Of these, approximately 86,000 or 15 per cent attend rural schools.

The Value of Rural Education

As the task force toured the province, school community after school community spoke in defence of the virtues, benefits and values of rural education. Despite the obvious challenges caused by school size, isolation and funding, the most passionate submissions to the task force were about protecting the future of small rural schools.

Parents and educators spoke of the closeness and sense of community found within rural schools. Students are known as individuals and are

treated as 'whole' persons. In these small schools, each student can make a personal impact on the whole and their talents and contributions are highlighted and recognized in the school community. A family atmosphere makes small rural schools safe and nurturing environments for learning. Most rural schools pride themselves on peer tutoring programs, family groupings and friendship among students in different grades.

The task force heard countless times that one of the chief benefits of education in a small community was a feeling of close community bonds. Small rural schools claim to foster a family atmosphere where older students take a greater responsibility for younger students. The consistent message is that small rural schools provided a safe learning environment. Furthermore, many parents report that safety is a primary reason to live in a rural setting.

Small classes and low teacher-pupil ratios enable the teacher to spend more time with each student. A flexible approach to meeting student needs often fosters innovative and creative solutions. Rural challenges force schools to examine new ideas and use less conservative teaching strategies and organizational solutions. It is worthy of note that many educational reform tools have been pioneered in rural schools. These include site-based management, multi-graded classrooms, peer assistance programs, block scheduling, mentoring and co-operative learning.

Teachers and principals report that communications with non-aboriginal parents is easier in rural schools. However, involving aboriginal parents remains a challenge. Parents and community volunteers are highly involved in rural education. Community mentorship programs, career preparation placements, reading programs and guest community speakers enrich the students' education through community involvement.

The rural school was described more than once as the 'heart of the community'. In many small towns, the school hosts weddings, dances, town meetings, movie nights, guest speakers and special community events, creating a close bond between the community and 'their' school. This is precisely why rural communities are so quick to defend their local school against closure.

The rural school represents more than a place for the children to be educated. In many ways, it also represents the right to preserve a rural culture and a viable economic development plan. The school becomes a

"In our small, physically isolated community, our one-room schoolhouse is the heart. Tourists and summer visitors tend to see it as a cute anachronism. But these non-residents see only the facade and not the community's and the children's love of the school."

John Stadt
Thetis Island Residents' and Ratepayers' Association

"The value of a school in a rural community goes far beyond its primary purpose of educating children."

British Columbia Teachers' Federation

statement of society's value and appreciation for the contributions that rural B.C. makes to the province. In fact, the task force received a number of submissions that spoke of the rural school as a community right that should be guaranteed to recognize rural B.C.'s addition to the province's economy.

The Challenges of Rural Education

Challenges such as declining enrolment, teacher professional development, effective use of technology and community involvement affect education in either urban or rural settings. However, many of the challenges heard by the task force are either unique to rural settings or have particularly profound effects in a small community.

Interdependency of Economic Activity, Social Services and Education

Many of B.C.'s rural communities could be best described as economically vulnerable. These communities have economies that rely heavily on one economic sector or one employer. The effects of a drop in commodity prices, a trade barrier, a mine closure or a series of poor salmon runs can be economically devastating for a small rural community. In these communities, other economic sectors are not available to absorb displaced workers. In such times of economic strain, underlying community social problems come to the forefront.

It is not coincidental that the Local Health Areas (LHA) identified by BC STATS as having the most severe economic hardship are often also found to have the poorest socio-economic conditions. Of the 20 LHAs with the lowest index score for human economic hardship indicators, 13 are also ranked as having the lowest socio-economic index scores. These conditions directly affect students. In addition, 11 of these LHAs also have the lowest index results for children at risk and 12 have the poorest index results for youth at risk.

This direct correlation between economic hardship and social issues for children and youth adds to the burden of schools and districts. The recent restructuring of social service delivery has resulted in school staff feeling increased responsibility to meet the community's needs. Local educators must play a greater role in counselling, drug and alcohol prevention, health education and early intervention strategies yet school staff are not always equipped or trained to handle such tasks.

Communities, districts and schools were also concerned that programs serving school-aged children, such as school meals programs, would no longer be funded by government.

In addition, many families are forced to relocate to other communities during economic downturns, decreasing enrolment.

"There is a natural tendency in society...to look to public education to solve all of society's problems. We can't do it and shouldn't be asked to. Unfortunately, the reality is that our staff have to deal with tears in the social fabric of the community in order to reach that child that needs an education."

Gordon Swan,
Vice-Chair,
School Board #58

Declining Enrolment

Recent census results highlight a national trend toward declining rural populations, including rural B.C. Sixty-four rural B.C. municipalities have experienced population declines between 1996 and 2001. For some municipalities, this decline has been as dramatic as 50 per cent. Although declining student enrolment is an issue within most school districts, the effects are particularly profound within districts serving rural communities.

Many B.C. rural communities are experiencing dramatic population declines. Over the last three years, 25 of 60 school districts annual enrolment has declined by over two per cent. All these districts serve rural schools. Enrolment decline is most severe among the 271 rural schools located within the smallest communities. During the past year, these schools have experienced an average enrolment decline of six per cent. Forty-three of these schools have had enrolment declines of over 15 per cent and 12 schools have experienced over 30 per cent decline. The enrolment projections for the next few years show little hope of any significant change.

The initial effect of lower district enrolment is a drop in funds generated by per-student funding, resulting in a decline in the total school board budget. The funding allocation system attempts to cushion school districts from the full budgetary effect of such declines by allocating half of the per-student funding to school districts where enrolment drops by more than one per cent.

Since the enrolment declines are spread among different communities in the district, the board must decide how to reallocate staff among its schools to accommodate the effects of reduced student funding. This could result in teacher layoffs or staffing only a part time position in a remote school. Adding to the challenge is the geographic dispersion of schools, which makes transferring teachers more difficult.

There are certain fixed costs regardless of whether a school is operating at capacity or not. Such costs include maintenance, hydro, property taxes,

"There is a BIG difference between a rural school located 15-20 km from town and one located 300 km from town."

Dave Martin,
Director of Instruction
SD No. 27

water and heating, and are included within the per-student funding total. Ideally, fixed costs are averaged among a full school population.

As student numbers drop, the financial viability of the school comes into question. Although research is now scrutinizing the actual long-term savings of rural school consolidations, many school boards feel that closing their remote schools is the only way to meet the immediate need to balance their budgets (Lawrence, Bingler, Diamond, Hill, Hoffman, Howley, Mitchell, Rudolph, Washor, 2002; Lauzon & Leahy, 2000). The option of school consolidation is then discussed and the politics of school closures begins. This process is often lengthy, acrimonious and divisive, pitting rural communities against their school district.

Enrolment decline can also affect the learning opportunities for secondary students. A steady drop in the number of students requires a drop in staffing levels. It becomes increasingly difficult to retain and attract specialist teachers when there are yearly layoffs and the number of classes within a teacher's specialty is reduced. Occasionally, staffing limitations and student numbers force a rural school to narrow the number of senior secondary courses offered. The courses that remain are often university eligibility requirements. Those that are dropped usually include trades, fine arts and locally developed courses.

Census data show that rural out-migration is higher for individuals with higher educational attainment (Statistics Canada, 2002). These data are reflective of parents who place a great family value on academic performance. The task force heard reports that some rural communities that experienced economic tough times found not only fewer students enrolled in their schools, but also fewer high-performing students.

Distance, Isolation and Climate

There are only 30 nations in the world that are as large as B.C. This geographic immensity provides formidable challenges.

Within our public education system, 23 rural school communities do not have road access. These include some of the 16 school communities that are at least 100 km by road or boat from the next nearest school community. Another 13 communities are not within 200 km of their school board office. None of these figures account for the many students who are personally isolated and are bussed or sent by boat great distances to attend the nearest school.

Winter further isolates rural students and schools. Icy roads, the constant threat of highway closures and the risk of avalanches and mudslides limit the travel outside of the community. Water transportation is also hindered by winter storms and high winds. During the winter months, transportation takes longer and remote communities are less accessible to school district services.

School district staff serving rural communities speaks of 'windshield time'. This refers to the long unproductive hours spent driving from the board office to rural communities. For example, a school psychologist in the Cariboo-Chilcotin will travel seven to eight hours round trip from the board office in Williams Lake to the school in Anahim Lake. Rural school districts estimate that as much as 25 per cent of many staff's time is spent in transit.

Although funding calculations (dispersion index) assist districts with the costs of such travel, they do not address the loss of productivity due to 'windshield time.' Every hour that a district ESL specialist spends travelling is an hour that does not directly help a student.

The distance from the school board office also affects the time needed for unexpected school repairs and technological support. Remote schools in the north report having to wait a week or more for the technical support needed to fix a computer crash. This is largely due to the time required to travel from the board office to the remote school.

The large distances separating remote communities from the board office increase the costs incurred by school trustees. The long driving times can also be a deterrent for many potential trustees, who cannot meet the work demands, school board service and the added time to drive to meetings.

Climate is a cost pressure that affects all districts regardless of location. Districts outside of the southern coast have to budget for snow removal, heating or cooling costs and increased maintenance. A harsh winter or increase in the costs of heating fuel can dramatically effect a district's operating costs.

"Travelling long distances and spending lots of time in a car is a fact of life for people who live in our rural communities."

Richard Smith,
Gold Trail Teachers' Association

Community/School Board Relations

The task force found that most rural communities had strong relations with their schools. Active involvement from the community and support from the town council created a positive addition to the students'

Over 117,000 B.C. students are bussed to school and the majority of these come from rural communities.

education. Close community bonds contribute to developing a sense of citizenship and community belonging. Most school boards have favourable relationships with the communities and municipalities within their districts. Partnerships and joint-use agreements are some of the examples of co-operation.

In some instances, it is apparent that relations are not all positive. The school board is elected to assure that all students within the district receive a quality education, while maintaining a balanced budget. Municipal officials are elected to ensure the safety, well-being and economic viability of their citizens. Conflicts arise when these two mandates are not in harmony.

The task force received a number of submissions from communities or parents that proposed shared service arrangements with the municipality to reduce school operating costs. These communities are frustrated by collective agreements between school boards and support staff that make sharing services extremely difficult or impossible without legislative intervention.

A number of submissions argue that the community should be given the education funding and the authority to operate the school. Strained community-school board relations are evident in some districts where remote communities felt that their boards are not responsive to local needs. These communities raise alternate governance models ranging from charter schools to municipally-run schools to a provincial rural schools school board.

School boards express that consensus building with the numerous town councils and mayors within their district is challenging. An increased sense of local entitlement and desire for autonomy make difficult decisions like school closure even more painful.

Transportation

Over 117,000 B.C. students are bussed to school and the majority of these come from rural communities. Unlike many urban centres where driving distances are relatively short, in rural communities the combination of the drive to the bus stop and the school bus or water taxi ride can add as much as three hours to a child's day. The task force identified three key issues surrounding rural transportation: commuting time, safety and transportation costs.

The thought of young students riding a bus for two or three hours a day on treacherous mountain roads is universally unappealing. Parents are troubled by the impact that early mornings, long days and tired evenings will have on their children. They are concerned that departing for school before 7 a.m., and leaving for home immediately after school, excludes their children from before or after school extra-curricular activities, tutoring and access to computer labs and libraries. Although parents thought that long commutes were bearable for older students, they felt that elementary aged students should be schooled as close to home as possible.

The task force heard how long bus rides to consolidated schools negatively effect student and parent satisfaction. Research on the effects of bussing on student achievement, however, is more inclusive. Most studies indicate that students bussed long distances did not score lower on standardized tests, teacher grades or grade point average (White, 1971; Zelter, 1970 Blanchard, 1947; Pauley, 1958; Scharf, 1974; and Rees, 1970 as quoted in Thompson, 1982). However, Michael Fox (1996), a Canadian geographer, found anecdotal evidence that students who were bussed long distances reported lower grades and poorer fitness.

Rural students face hazards that their city dwelling peers do not. Lack of street lighting and sidewalks combined with frigid winter temperatures, high snow banks, logging trucks and predatory wildlife make the walk to school a danger. In the interest of student safety, some rural school boards fund bussing for students within the former walk limits.

The Ministry of Education currently distributes over $85 million for costs of district transportation. However, many rural districts claim that this is not adequate. For example, parents in some districts complain that recent district budget cuts have greatly reduced or ended water taxi or ferry funding, leaving them with the option of either self-funding transportation or enrolling their children in distance education.

Some parents are also concerned that their school board does not adequately reimburse for the mileage to transport students to school. Boards also claim that rough roads and winter conditions place a heavy toll on school buses, requiring greater maintenance costs than city buses.

Until this past year, school boards submitted the number of students who qualify for ministry-prescribed walk limits and the total kilometres driven to transport these students. Based on transportation formulas, the ministry would fund school boards accordingly. However, since the ministry funded all bussing, there was little incentive for school districts to

"IRPs have not been organized in a way that is useful to teachers where there exists multi-aged classrooms."

Teachers' Associations of Southern Okanagan and Keremeos

become more transportation efficient. This year, transportation budgets have been retained at the 2001/02 levels. It is now up to the school boards to determine their own bussing policies and practices. The ministry no longer puts restrictions on who is eligible for ministry-funded transportation.

Educational Challenges

The task force found that delivering a quality educational program in rural communities could pose a number of challenges. These difficulties include multi-grade classes, teacher training, professional development, teacher recruitment and retention, support of special needs students and course selection at the secondary level.

It is not uncommon to find the rural teacher with three or more grades of students in the same classroom. Addressing multiple learning outcomes, spanning different grades is a notable challenge. It takes a skilled teacher to effectively instruct students in these settings, and fortunately, B.C. is blessed with many such teachers. The task force found that there is certainly not a lack of excellent teachers in rural B.C. That said, the curriculum does little to help teachers of multi-grade classes. The Integrated Resource Packages (IRPs) were not designed for use in a multi-grade classroom. Teachers expressed the need for a support document that would assist in adapting the curriculum to these settings.

In addition, teachers and districts expressed concern that new teachers were not adequately prepared to teach in rural schools. New teachers require training for multi-grade classes, experience serving as generalists at the secondary level, expertise in the use of technology and electronic learning and a general understanding of rural life and education. The task force found that there are currently no rural education courses offered to teachers in training in B.C., although Malaspina University College does offer a graduate program in rural education through James Cook University in Australia. A lack of specific training could be a contributing factor behind the relatively high teacher turnover in rural settings.

One of the greatest challenges for rural educators is finding relevant professional development opportunities that fit within the district professional development budget. Teachers in remote areas wanting to attend a workshop in Vancouver must pay for air travel, accommodation, meals and workshop fees. Often these expenses for a single workshop total far more than the teacher's share of the district professional development

budget. The task force found a need for cost-effective professional development opportunities that address rural education needs.

Many rural districts claim to have difficulties in recruiting and retaining teachers and support professionals. Analysis by the B.C. Public School Employers' Association released in summer 2002 identifies that while a general teacher shortage is not evident in the province, districts report shortages and recruitment challenges in certain subjects and in some regions. This phenomenon is the subject of further analysis. Areas of reported shortage include industrial education, high school mathematics and science, French Immersion, French, home economics and elementary special education. A number of districts report lengthy recruitment times for speech pathologists and school psychologists.

Although much of this localized teacher shortage is due to retirements and resignations, teacher turnover was reported to be a serious issue in many rural communities. It is not only a challenge to find qualified teachers for many of our rural schools, but it is also sometimes difficult to retain them. One district complained that the training investment that it makes in their staff is lost when a teacher with newly acquired expertise leaves for urban districts.

Collective agreements are seen as a hindrance to attracting young teachers from urban centres to rural districts. Many young teachers, who may be willing to teach in a rural or remote school for the first few years after graduation, are discouraged from such positions due to an inability to later transfer their seniority if they decide to return to the city. They often must take a position as a teacher-on-call and gain seniority within an urban board where teacher supply is plentiful. As a result, a decision to teach in rural B.C. is seen as a career-long commitment.

In small communities with declining enrolments, it is becoming increasingly difficult to offer a diverse course selection to senior secondary students. Such teaching assignments are not usually attractive to specialist teachers and can complicate efforts to fill vacancies. To offer a variety of courses, teachers must often teach outside of their specialty area.

Supporting students with special needs is a particular challenge in districts where schools are greatly dispersed. Some support services should be delivered on a regular basis, but travel times make this impossible.

The task force heard from some rural communities that the rate of fetal alcohol syndrome disorder (FASD) is extremely high and thus require significantly higher special needs support. The Ministry of Education does not

Projected Annual Net Teacher Shortage by Region

Okanagan	70 teachers
Northern	39 teachers
Kootenay	28 teachers
Central	37 teachers

Source: BCPSEA Labour Market Planning 2002: K-12 Education Sector

Research indicates that parental involvement in home and school learning environments is associated with higher student achievement levels.

collect data or allocate supplementary funding with respect to FASD and therefore lacks the statistics to confirm this claim. Students with medical conditions such as FASD may be reported in any one of a number of special education categories that address their specific educational needs. The category where numbers of students with FASD most often appear is intensive behaviour interventions/serious mental illness. At times, FASD students present with multiple, complex conditions may meet eligibility requirements for physical disabilities/chronic health impairment. Comparing district totals with provincial incidence in these two special needs categories (physical disability/chronic health and intensive behavioural intervention) produces varying correlations. A correlation can be seen in some regions, particularly Northern B.C., between extremely high incidences of physical disability/chronic health needs and rurality; however, no such correlation can be observed with intensive behavioural intervention.

Aboriginal Education

Since many rural schools have high proportions of aboriginal students, it is difficult to have a meaningful discussion about rural education without addressing the challenges facing aboriginal students. Provincially, the aboriginal school completion rate is just over 40 per cent, a higher proportion of aboriginal students are below expectations on Foundation Skills Assessment scores and aboriginal students are over-represented in special education categories with the exception of the gifted category. Aboriginal communities continue to voice concern about the academic achievement of their children and racism within the school system.

Research indicates that parental involvement in home and school learning environments is associated with higher student achievement levels. Students whose parents are involved have better attendance and retention rates and have easier transitions through challenging periods. These students consistently show higher self-confidence at every grade level. However, many First Nations parents are uncomfortable and uncertain about how to be more active in their children's learning. Efforts to better involve First Nations parents in school activities are further complicated by rural geography and climate.

Technological Challenges

In August 2000, the provincial government completed the Provincial Learning Network or PLNet. This technological infrastructure was created

to provide a secure, high-speed network connecting all of B.C.'s public schools and colleges in a centrally-managed 'wide area network' or 'intranet'. PLNet provides each school with Internet access, secure data transfer capability and provides around the clock help-desk and consultative support services.

The task force found that although rural schools had access to the Internet through PLNet, many small communities had such narrow bandwidth that they were unable to use their connection for much more than email. In many remote areas, the world wide web is the closest that students get to exploring life outside of their small community. Narrow bandwidth restricts their ability to open certain web sites, use interactive web-based software, participate in live web-based learning opportunities, download large Internet files and fully benefit from electronically delivered courses.

The task force found that although rural schools had access to the Internet through PLNet, many small communities had such narrow bandwidth that they were unable to use their connection for much more than email.

The intent is that slower connections will be upgraded over time, as technology costs decline and additional funding becomes available. However, finding additional funds to upgrade connections in rural schools has been difficult. Federal government promises and programs to bring high-speed connections to rural communities have been slow. Currently some communities and school boards are working to establish high-speed networks outside of PLNet, as they feel that needed upgrades will not materialize.

Remote schools also have other technological challenges. In many small schools, technology support is not available. As a result, the district's technology support staff must make a service call for every computer problem, and in many remote schools, this takes a number of days.

Distributed Electronic Learning

Great advances have been made in the quality of courses offered through electronic means. A number of different groups and companies now provide electronically delivered courses to meet the IRP learning outcomes. For small communities struggling to offer a variety of senior secondary courses to small classes without the benefit of a teacher specialist, distributed electronic learning holds great promise. The sharing of instructors through video conferencing is also seen as a potential technological solution for small schools.

The possibility of enhancing course options and enriching a non-specialist's class through electronically delivered courses holds promise. However, this will require a shift from the traditional teaching techniques.

The task force understands that the funding allocation system is designed to recognize that in some rural regions, some fixed costs are higher due to climate or isolation.

The task force found that despite the potential of electronic learning, viewing it as a comprehensive solution was met with widespread reservation. Many students lack the intrinsic motivation, reading skills or individual learning style that these courses demand, and appropriate on-site teacher support is still required. Access was cited as another barrier as many rural schools lack the required bandwidth to fully participate in many programs. Students lacking a computer or Internet connection at home are also at a disadvantage.

Video conferencing or satellite-delivered courses require sizable investments in technology and common timetables. Although the costs are dropping and efforts to co-ordinate rural timetables are underway, this is still not seen as a widespread solution.

Funding

The funding allocation system is designed to recognize that in some rural regions, some fixed costs are higher due to climate or isolation. The funding allocation system attempts to address these costs through its unique geographic factors, including the dispersion index, physical and environmental components and the small community supplement.

The dispersion index addresses the fact that certain districts have a greater financial burden than others due to the separation of their schools from the board office. This component is designed to cover additional costs of increased travel. Physical and environmental components also include adjustment for low district enrolment. The rural factor is measured by small populations in the city or town where the board office is located, combined with the distance from Vancouver and the nearest regional centre, sparseness and climate. The small community supplement provides additional funding to school boards with elementary schools in communities with fewer than 250 full time enrolled students (FTEs) or secondary schools with less than 650 FTEs.

Notwithstanding the intentions of the funding allocation system, the task force encountered widespread concern about funding and the effects of the new funding system. Four emerging themes deserve to be addressed:

- extra costs of rural school operations;
- rural/urban-funding equity;
- widespread misunderstanding of the new system; and,
- a sense of rural entitlement.

The costs of operating rural schools were mentioned frequently. Rural expenses for transportation, heating, capital costs associated with less competition for tendered contracts, shipping expenses, teacher recruitment, isolation compensation and district travel are all quoted as being significantly more than in urban areas. There is concern that the unique geographic factors do not accurately reflect the real costs of operating schools in remote and rural communities.

Throughout rural B.C. there is perception that the new funding allocation system under-funds rural boards in relation to urban boards. The rationale is that urban schools, with greater economies of scale, are receiving the same per-student funding amounts as their smaller, more dispersed rural counterparts. A commonly held view is that ministry formulae designed to account for unique geographic factors are not adequate at levelling the perceived inequities between urban and rural schools. Concern arises that a system that allocates based predominantly on per-student funding is unworkable in areas of high enrolment decline.

The task force received a number of submissions from parents, teachers, district staff and trustees that highlighted a misunderstanding of the new funding allocation system. The groups displayed confusion about how per-student amount of $5,308 was determined, lack of clarity around the small community supplement and questions about transportation funding.

School and District Parent Advisory Committees and members of the communities quoted funding generated by their school, students and community tax base as justification not to close their rural school. Although often confused about how funding totals were reached, rural communities voiced a very clear sense of entitlement to local education for their children.

This sense was further increased with the release of the Urban Futures Institute's report, *Resource Dependency: The Spatial Origins of B.C.'s Economic Base.*[1] The report emphasized the overall economic importance of the commodities produced in rural B.C., claiming that urban B.C. accounted for only 21 per cent of the province's exports over the past decade. On a per capita basis, non-metropolitan B.C. accounted for $14,290 in exports compared to $4,278 for metropolitan areas. Rural communities felt that based on their contribution to B.C.'s prosperity, their children were entitled to quality education close to home.

1. A copy of this report is available on-line at: www.urbanfutures.com/Research/The%20Spatial%20Origins%20of%20BC's%20Economic%20Base.pdf

For some, equity means that whatever educational opportunities Vancouver students have, rural children should also have regardless of how remotely they are located.

Framing a Rural Education Strategy

Education is about overcoming challenges and enabling learners. The task ahead is to create a rural education strategy that, in spite of the challenges, provides educational equity for students in rural communities. Many of the submissions and presentations to the task force dealt with, in one way or another, the concept of equity for rural B.C. The question becomes what is an equitable or 'equally good' education for rural students.

For some, equity means that whatever educational opportunities Vancouver students have, rural children should also have regardless of how remotely they are located. These people would argue that if Burnaby students can go the Science World, then the province should fund the same field trip for students in Lower Post. This definition of equity is that of sameness—'equally good' means exactly the same.

The other view is that there are benefits of a rural lifestyle that urban students would never experience. The differences between rural and urban communities necessitate a system of diversity, where districts serving rural schools and rural communities find solutions that are equally good but different than those found in urban locations. Students in rural communities would graduate with the skills, knowledge and abilities to pursue career goals similar to their urban peers. However, these goals would be pursued differently based on their rural setting.

The task force has chosen not to view equity as 'equally good' through sameness. Rural and urban communities are different and to attempt to apply urban solutions to rural schools is to ignore the uniqueness that distinguishes rural B.C. Focusing on making rural and urban education the same results in constant comparisons and excuses that do little to improve education for rural children. In fact, as Aristotle observed, treating unequals equally could very well increase the inequalities instead of eradicating them.

The task force has chosen to define equity as 'equally good' through diversity. The differences between rural and urban communities necessitate a strategy of diversity, where districts serving rural schools and rural communities find solutions that capitalize on local strengths and differences. It is not sufficient to impose urban solutions on rural schools and expect 'equally good' educational outcomes.

Rural and urban education outcomes need to be 'equally good', while reflecting the diversity of their location. Rural and urban students should have similar reading, writing, numeracy, citizenship and school completion outcomes.

Despite the many benefits of rural education espoused to the task force, a gap remains in performance between rural and urban students.

Rural Schools and The Rural-Urban Achievement Gap

Despite the many benefits of rural education espoused to the task force, a gap remains in performance between rural and urban students. Recently, Statistics Canada released a report entitled Understanding the Rural-Urban Reading Gap, which examined the reasons behind rural-urban achievement gaps. Using data collected in the Youth in Transition Survey (YITS) and the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), Statistics Canada found that Canada's urban 15-year-old students performed significantly better in reading than their rural counterparts. Using an Organization of Economic Co-operation and Development mean of 500 and a standard deviation of 100, B.C. rural schools performed at 530 compared to 539 for urban schools. This means that the average reading level of B.C. urban students is slightly higher than rural students.

This achievement gap represents the third smallest behind Nova Scotia and Manitoba. B.C.'s rural students were assessed to have the second highest rural reading scores in Canada behind Alberta. In addition, B.C. rural students read at a higher level than the average in six other provinces. B.C.'s education system can build on this strength.[2]

The report also found that families of rural students were more likely to have lower socio-economic backgrounds and lower education levels than their urban counterparts. Fewer rural parents were employed as professionals. However, the report concluded that the rural-urban achievement gap is not as reliant on a student's parents' wealth, education or occupation as it is on the education and job level of the entire community.

To further understand the rural-urban gap, outcomes from the 2002 Foundation Skills Assessment of Reading, Writing and Numeracy were studied using a multivariate modelling approach called hierarchical linear modelling. Student-level mean scaled scores (produced from raw FSA student/item level data using Item Response Theory) in reading and numeracy for Grades 4, 7 and 10 were modeled as outcome variables using the complete set of independent variables, including student level variables, community variables and school attributes. [3]

2. A chart comparing rural and urban reading performance for all provinces is found in Appendix B.

3. Student attributes include gender, aboriginality, English as a Second Language (ESL), French Immersion, Gifted and non-Gifted Special Education programs, non-English home language and the age of the student at the time of assessment. Community attributes include median household income of the community, proportion of the community in basic occupations, proportion of the community with low education level, and unemployment rate. School attributes include school latitude and longitude, school age since construction, school rurality, and overall student satisfaction observed in the 2002 Student Satisfaction Survey. More details are found in Appendix C.

In all cases, scaled score outcomes were significantly lower in rural settings, ranging from a low of .4 per cent in the case of Grade 10 reading to between 2.7 per cent and 4.6 per cent in the other grade levels tested.

Aboriginal status and community education levels account for the largest measured effects of rurality on performance. Rural schools had noticeable differences in the proportions of the school population that were aboriginal. In those grade levels that participated in the Foundation Skills Assessment, rural schools had an aboriginal proportion of 11.4 per cent versus 4.4 per cent in non-rural schools.

The student satisfaction levels were found to be powerfully associated with Foundation Skills Assessment performance, with an increase of around four to six per cent in achievement levels and an increase in average satisfaction of one scale point (on the one to five point satisfaction scale). This implies a difference of about 20 per cent in achievement between a school with all students at the lowest level of satisfaction compared with a school with all students at the highest level of satisfaction.

The Rural Gap

FSA	Effect Size As Per Cent Of Mean In Rural Areas
Reading 4	-2.7%
Reading 7	-2.7%
Reading 10	-0.4%
Numeracy 4	-3.5%
Numeracy 7	-4.6%
Numeracy 10	-4.1%

The available data is unable to characterize student or community aspects very well. As a result, the total explained variance in the model is only seven to 17 per cent. This is considered a fairly weak explanatory capacity. If student-level demographic information, such as income or education levels of the families of individual students were available, the multivariate model would be considerably more powerful in predicting student achievement. Also, the data does not show the type or effectiveness of instructional practices within schools.

The questions remain: can the rural-urban achievement gap be reduced or eliminated and can a small school offer the quality of educational experience that would be required? Research seems to say yes. A British study on the quality of large and small schools, based on extensive testing programs and school inspections, reaches the following conclusion:

> "In the past, there has tended to be a belief that small schools could not provide as good an education as large schools. Recent findings indicate that pupils in the schools with fewer than 100 pupils on roll, most of which are rural, achieve standards which are slightly higher than those achieved by pupils in the larger schools. Overall, the quality of learning tends to be slightly better in the small rather than the large schools. On a wide range of comparisons concerned with the quality of education provision, small schools are rated rather more favourably than larger ones," (HMSO (1995):"Rural England" London).

A small-scale Swedish study (Skolverket, 2000) found similar conclusions.

> These studies question the premise that small rural schools are too limited in size and resources to ever academically hold their own against larger urban schools.
>
> The key to small rural schools overcoming size and resource limitations seems to lie in instructional quality. Research of educational gaps finds that increasing instructional quality is the most effective strategy for reducing achievement gaps. Studies are now highlighting the benefits of matching more powerful teaching with the most needy students as a key strategy to reducing the achievement gap (Darling-Hammond, 1997; Haycock, 1998). Professional development that helps build expertise in instructional practices through interactive, systematic and collaborative means is proving to be effective in reducing achievement gaps (Grossman, 1990; NFIE, 1996).

Rural Education Task Force Recommendations

In appreciation of the Minister's interest in rural concerns and desire to assure a quality education for students in rural communities, the task force recommends that the following make up the beginnings of a provincial rural education strategy:

1. **Recognize the contributions of rural schools.**

   Rationale:

   Rural education contributes to the strength and richness of an education system that is consistently one of the best in the world. The task force believes that rural education needs to be valued and nurtured for its educational accomplishments and its contributions to the cultural and societal fabric of rural B.C.

2. **Make the improvement of rural-urban equity of educational outcomes a Ministry of Education priority.**

   Rationale:

   Rural-urban equity emerged as a consistent theme during the task force's tour. The task force found that there were two views of equity— equity that focuses on similar educational outcomes and equity that focuses on the same educational inputs. The former would seek similar science outcomes from students in Lower Post as in Vancouver. The latter would look to duplicate the same science field trips. The first recognizes that urban solutions are not necessarily the best for rural students, whereas, the second looks for a 'one-size-fits-all' education.

   Discussion about rural equity that focused on building on the strengths and diversity of rural communities to achieve excellent education outcomes led to ambitious yet attainable goals. Using this definition of equity, solutions can be found to help rural students achieve equally good performance outcomes as their urban counterparts.

   A recent report by the B.C. Progress Board, *Learning To Win,* recommends that the "disparity in performance levels and completion rates across the province and between rural and urban districts should be addressed." The task force feels that in order for rural education equity to be established as a sustainable focus,

objectives and performance measures should be imbedded within the Ministry of Education's Service Plan.

The recently released Statistics Canada report, *Understanding the Rural-Urban Reading Gap,* found that B.C. had the third smallest rural-urban reading gap among all of the provinces. The task force feels that it is therefore reasonable to have long-term goals of eliminating the rural-urban gap and becoming the national leader in rural education.

3. **Create the provincial vision for rural education by focusing on how to foster equitable student achievement in all areas of the province.**

   Rationale:

   During the past year and a half, the education system has worked hard to focus on improving student achievement. Communication, accountability contracts, school planning councils, a task force and conferences have raised achievement as the dominant educational priority. In the same way, rural education must be elevated from an exclusively resource allocation discussion to one which examines the future of rural education.

   The task force recommends that this priority includes narrowing the performance gap between rural and urban students. Rural schools and districts with promising practices that support this vision should be recognized.

4. **Invest in continuous instructional improvements and success of rural educators through professional development and teacher training.**

   Rationale:

   Research shows that properly structured professional development aimed at improving instructional quality is very effective in decreasing achievement gaps. (Grossman, 1990; NFIE, 1996). Although the task force found a high level of excellence among rural teachers, the lack of professional development opportunities for rural educators was a strong theme across the province.

   Work clearly needs to be done with school boards and post secondary institutions to provide relevant professional development at a reasonable cost. The possibilities of regional conferences, short-courses

"Professional development must be meaningful, accessible and both cost and time-effective."

Bendina Miller, Superintendent SD No. 6, Rocky Mountain

and learning networks for rural staff should be explored. Such professional development opportunities should be interactive, systemic and collaborative. It is recommended that this include a method for rural teachers to work together to apply the course content in their schools.

Research suggests that two of the school factors with the greatest potential to decrease rural achievement gaps are a disciplinary climate and improved student behaviour (Statistics Canada, 2002). The task force believes future professional development initiatives for rural educators should include behaviour management training for rural educators.

The task force suggests establishing partnerships with teacher training faculties to offer rural education courses and a rural education certificate for new teachers. It is recommended that this include a teaching practicum in a rural setting. As much as possible, future rural teachers should be encouraged to receive their training in communities other than Greater Vancouver or Victoria.

5. **Work with education partners to build a network of rural educators and leaders.**

   Rationale:

   The task force found that there were few structured opportunities for rural educators, parents and community leaders to discuss their issues, concerns, best practices and solutions. It recommends that the Ministry of Education establishes partnerships to use technology to assist sharing rural education ideas and promising practices.

   It also recommends that a session for rural educators be included as part of all education partner meetings. This would give an opportunity to establish strong support networks among rural trustees, superintendents, secretary treasurers, principals, teachers, parent advisory committees and community leaders.

6. **Produce a planning document that that enables teachers to adapt the curriculum— Integrated Resource Packages— to reflect the needs of multi-grade classrooms and the strengths of rural environments.**

   Rationale:

Currently, the IRPs lack the flexibility needed in multi-grade classes, and teachers are challenged to adjust the curriculum so that all students regardless of their age meet all learning outcomes. A planning document is needed to assist teachers in small schools in creating a multi-year cyclical curriculum plan that meets provincially-prescribed learning outcomes. Such a document exists within the independent school system. Many teachers of multi-grade classes would benefit from increased online accessibility of the curriculum that facilitates searches of learning outcomes across grades and subjects.

A growing curriculum movement called place-based education draws from local culture, history and geography to create a meaningful curriculum. It enables student learning to benefit from the unique qualities of each community and local environment. The task force believes that a curriculum support resource that helps to link the learning outcomes to rural communities would benefit both teachers and students.

7. **Encourage partnerships and co-ordination across social service agencies to support students in communities undergoing economic hardship.**

   Rationale:

   Many resource communities are vulnerable to economic downturns and associated social impacts. School staff often is required to provide students with social support during these difficult times. Although some schools and boards have effective working relationships with the various social service agencies operating in their districts, these arrangements are not universal. Partnerships between social service agencies, schools and school boards should be facilitated to best support students.

8. **Enable creative solutions to reduce school operating costs.**

   Rationale:

   The task force found that rural school districts require the flexibility to find creative solutions to rural challenges. Often ministry rules or collective agreements hinder these solutions.

   An example of this was found in Wells, where students are being educated in a makeshift classroom, while the school building lies

vacant. The only way for the municipality to help the school reduce operating costs and retain a school in Wells was to move students into a municipal facility. The municipality rents the school from the school board for community activities, but collective agreements prevent the facility from being used to educate students. Such inflexibility prevents communities from finding and using innovative solutions.

The task force suggests that rural school districts be consulted as part of government initiatives to identify obstacles that prevent creative solutions. Consideration should be given to allow some flexibility options to small schools with fewer than 100 students.

9. **Facilitate the provision of increased educational opportunities for students and educators by considering more flexible, balanced approaches to designing school calendars and timetables.**

Rationale:

Recent changes to the School Act allow for greater flexibility in school calendars. Boundary School District has led the way with four-day weeks and reports positive results ranging from financial savings to improved student, parent and staff satisfaction. School districts in the Kootenays have begun constructing a common secondary timetable that would facilitate sharing courses through electronically-delivered classes.

The task force believes that school boards should seek cost savings through year-round schooling, four-day weeks, altered holiday breaks and other calendar modifications. Changes to the school calendar to accommodate local events, hunting seasons, salmon runs and cultural events may benefit communities with high numbers of aboriginal students. Common calendars also facilitate shared professional development opportunities.

Many of the solutions to rural education challenges involve sharing educational services among schools, districts and regions. Possibilities of common secondary courses via video conferencing or online instruction are significantly easier between schools sharing a common timetable. Efforts to align the timetables of regional secondary schools should be encouraged.

10. Use shared services among school districts, in regions and within small communities to find cost savings. Use the savings to support rural education.

Rationale:

There are a number of successful examples of shared services within B.C.'s education system. Kootenay-Columbia School District and Arrow Lakes School District currently share a variety of financial services including capital planning, payroll, accounts payable, day-to-day accounting and budget development. Arrow Lakes estimates that this arrangement saves them $70,000 annually. Other districts have similar arrangements.

The task force feels that there are additional services such as professional development, facility management, human resources, teacher recruitment, transportation planning and some special needs services should be shared or provided more cost effectively. A pilot region should be sought to share services.

Boundary School District's integrated service model shares school facilities with the Boundary Ministry of Children and Family Development, Boundary Family and Individual Services Society, Public Health and the Boundary Child Care Resource and Referral to provide seamless programs and services to children and families across the entire region. By using the school space vacated through declining enrolments, different agencies help to defer the building operating costs and eventually share administrative support costs. This model is similar to what some northern Saskatchewan communities are using.

11. Build local capacity in accessing grants, federal funding and corporate partnerships that could provide additional funding to rural schools.

Rationale:

The task force found that some communities and school districts were extremely effective in accessing funding outside of Ministry of Education sources. Remote schools such as Tatla Lake School (Cariboo-Chilcotin School District) have been very successful at finding alternate sources of funding and sponsorship to support their educational vision. These include grants from the Vancouver Foundation, community donations, technology pilots and a partnership with Ducks Unlimited. Northern B.C. has recently benefited

"The Ministry of Education needs to provide more information to parents and others to allow them to more clearly understand the distribution of funds for education in B.C."

BC Federation of Parent Advisory Councils

from a $4-million partnership with Duke Energy for regional education initiatives.

The task force feels that there should be efforts to encourage similar partnerships between funding agencies and corporations and regions, school districts and schools. The key to such partnerships is knowledge of potential funding sources and effective proposal writing skills. This capacity needs to be increased throughout rural B.C. and especially in single industry towns.

12. Increase public understanding of the funding allocation system and the unique geographic factors.

Rationale:

The task force found that there was a general misunderstanding about the components of the new funding allocation system. Some thought that the $5,308-per student funding was formulated based on costs of education in urban areas. In addition, a lack of understanding about walk limits and current transportation funding was also apparent. The funding for unique geographic factors was not well understood either.

A frequently asked questions page on the Ministry of Education web site could help reduce much of the funding confusion.

13. Review the funding of rural schools.

Rationale:

The task force found a commonly held view that the new funding allocation system does not work for rural B.C. This view was consistent with the findings of the Select Standing Committee on Finance and Government Services report on the 2003 budget consultation process. The report states that, "the Committee was struck forcibly by how much financial pressure educators working in the K-to-12 system seemed to be experiencing as they try to adjust to the new funding formula for school districts."

The task force recognizes that until the province's economic condition improves, the education budget will be maintained at its current funding level. That said the task forces recommends a consultative examination of the current allocation system would benefit rural B.C. students, parents and communities.

14. Increase learning options for rural students and educators through technological solutions.

Rationale:

Despite the reservations among some rural educators, the task force believes that the promise of electronically-delivered instruction is too great to ignore. Partnerships should be established between the Ministry of Education, school boards, corporations and non-profit organizations to explore technological solutions that increase learning opportunities for students. Efforts should be made to avoid focusing on software products and to instead concentrate on more comprehensive learning solutions.

In the absence of PLNet upgrades, solutions should be found that will be functional using limited bandwidths. An inventory of district technology initiatives and resources should be compiled and shared among all school districts to facilitate finding common technological solutions to educational challenges.

When additional revenue sources are found, the first priority for technology investment should be rural schools.

15. Deliver services to rural special needs students by developing partnerships and creative solutions.

Rationale:

Providing special needs services to remote rural communities will require creative solutions such as the use of technology or sharing support services with other districts, municipalities or health regions.

16. Seek models for education delivery to young children in remote rural communities as an alternative to school closure.

Rationale:

The task force received a number of submissions that spoke of the rural school as a community right that should be guaranteed to recognize the contribution rural B.C. makes to the provincial economy. When faced with school closure, strained community-school board relationships develop and remote communities feel that their boards are not responsive to local needs. These communities raise alternate governance models ranging from charter schools to municipally-run schools to a provincial rural schools school board.

"All schools must make special efforts to reach out to First Nations parents in meaningful ways."

First Nations Educational Steering Committee

The task force was convinced that rural communities valued and depended on their local schools enough to warrant an option of last recourse for the community should the school board deem it necessary to close a remote rural school.

17. Encourage greater cooperation between school districts and First Nations groups and parents.

Rationale:

A large gap remains between aboriginal and non-aboriginal students performance. Although ministry and school district initiatives are showing progress in narrowing this gap, much more work is required. Efforts to include First Nations parents more in school and school district activities must also be explored.

18. Increase connections with all parents, including those of students who currently receive public education through an alternate delivery system such as home schooling.

Rationale:

The task force is aware that a significant number of urban and rural B.C. school age children do not attend public school. Encouraging an affiliation with their rural school could have a positive impact on declining enrolment and on the quality of education that these children, as well as those in the public system, are receiving.

19. Build on the strength of volunteerism in rural communities.

Rationale:

The task force saw evidence across the province of the strong sense of community volunteerism. The list of volunteer activities was endless. It included a parent who stayed at the school after dropping off their children to help students with computers; a community mentor who helped music students produce CDs of their work; parent coaches who helped with extra-curricular activities; and, local biologists who visited science classes to help link local flora and fauna to the curriculum. The task force was struck by how active many rural community members are in volunteering at the local school.

Efforts to bolster and celebrate this spirit of volunteerism should be advanced by the Ministry of Education and local school boards.

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Appendix A

List of Written and Oral Submissions

SD#	District	City	Date	Attendees	Submissions
05	South East Kootenay	Cranbrook	Oct. 31, 2002	2	4
06	Rocky Mountain	Invermere	Oct. 31, 2002	17	5
08	Kootenay Lake	Nelson	Oct. 18, 2002	17	5
10	Arrow Lakes	Nakusp	Oct. 29, 2002	10	2
19	Revelstoke	Revelstoke	Oct. 30, 2002	7	3
20	Kootenay-Columbia	Blueberry	Nov. 04, 2002	24	8
22	Vernon	Lumby	Oct. 17, 2002	17	5
23	Central Okanagan	Oyama	Oct. 17, 2002	25	3
27	Cariboo-Chilcotin	Williams Lake	Oct. 25, 2002	19	7
28	Quesnel	Quesnel	Nov. 14, 2002	21	20
48	Howe Sound	Whistler	Nov. 15, 2002	12	1
49	Central Coast	Via phone/e-mail	Oct. 17, 2002	1	1
50	Haida Gwaii-Queen Charlotte	Via phone/e-mail	Nov. 5, 2002	1	
51	Boundary	Grand Forks	Oct. 25, 2002	16	4
52	Prince Rupert	Prince Rupert	Oct. 29, 2002	11	3
53	Okanagan-Similkameen	Oliver	Oct. 21, 2002	22	6
54	Bulkley Valley	Smithers	Oct. 28, 2002	11	5
57	Prince George	Prince George	Nov. 13, 2002	16	6
58	Nicola-Similkameen	Merritt	Oct. 21, 2002	12	9
59	Peace River South	Via phone/email	Several calls	1	1
64	Gulf Islands	Ganges	Nov. 05, 2002	25	1
69	Qualicum	Parksville	Nov. 06, 2002	10	5
70	Alberni	Meeting cancelled	Nov. 06, 2002	1	2
71	Comox Valley	Campbell River	Nov. 05, 2002	6	4
72	Campbell River	Campbell River	Nov. 05, 2002	15	17
73	Kamloops-Thompson	Kamloops	Oct. 16, 2002	17	15
74	Gold Trail	Ashcroft	Oct. 20, 2002	16	10
81	Fort Nelson	Fort Nelson	Oct. 05, 2002	6	2
82	Coast Mountain	Terrace	Oct. 29, 2002	14	8
83	North Okanagan/Shuswap	Salmon Arm	Oct. 16, 2002	19	3
84	Vancouver Island West	Campbell River	Nov. 05, 2002	2	2
85	Vancouver Island North	Port Hardy	Nov. 07, 2002	23	19

87	Stikine	Fort Nelson	Oct. 05, 2002	1	1
91	Nechako Lakes	Fraser Lake	Oct. 30, 2002	18	6
92	Nisga'a	Terrace (with SD 82)	Oct. 29, 2002	1	
Educational Partners					
	CUPE		Dec. 06, 2002		1
	BCSTA		Nov. 28, 2002		1
	BCTF		Dec. 02, 2002		1
	BCPVPA		Jan. 03, 2003		1
	FNESC		Dec. 02, 2002		1
	BCCPAC		Dec. 20, 2002		1
	BCSDSTA		Dec. 03, 2002		1
	CPF (Canadian Parents for French)		Dec. 18, 2002		1

Submissions for Districts that did not meet total 8. General Emails = 25

Appendix B

Student Performance in Reading for Rural and Urban Schools

Reading Performance

Province	Urban Schools	Rural Schools	Provincial Average
Newfoundland	538	501	517
PEI	526	504	517
Nova Scotia	522	519	521
New Brunswick	510	491	501
Quebec	538	527	536
Ontario	535	520	533
Manitoba	531	527	529
Saskatchewan	533	523	529
Alberta	557	536	550
British Columbia	539	530	538
Canada	538	523	534

Source: Understanding the Rural-Urban Reading Gap (Statistics Canada, 2002)

Scores are standardized with and OECD mean of 500, and a standard deviation of 100.